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MALCOLM

Remembering

Malcolm

By Nat Hentoff

It was before Malcolm X's picture had been in the white press. Indeed, very little about Elijah Muhammad's Lost-Found Nation of Islam had appeared in the white media when I first went to see Malcolm in the mid-1950's. I knew something of the Black Muslims because I read the black press and because a number of jazz musicians had been talking about the growing, disciplined ranks of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad's straight-backed legions. And they had been talking about this tall, lean prince of the Nation of Islam, this Malcolm X, who was one hell of a soloist.

I had never seen Malcolm afraid before. I had never seen any fear in him. But fear was in him that afternoon. He told me he did not expect to live much longer. And the last thing he said to me, "Whatever happens, it won't be Elijah."

He didn't say any more. What I thought he meant then, and what I still think he meant was that the CIA had targeted him. Malcolm had been wire-tapped and surveilled by the FBI in the interests of "national security" from the time he had become reasonably prominent, and probably before. He said he was certain the CIA was on his trail in Africa. Malcolm, after all, was becoming more and more a figure of symbolic significance in the Third World, and he had plans to become a familiar presence at the United Nations.

Twelve days before his assassination, Malcolm was scheduled to speak at a meeting in Paris, but the French government refused him entrance as an "undesirable." French authorities explained that Malcolm's speech could have provoked demonstrations undermining "the public order."

In his 1973 book, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X* (Harper & Row), Peter Goldman speculates that Malcolm was barred from France because the French had "acted on the representation of two of their lately liberated colonies, Senegal and the Ivory Coast; that Malcolm—aided and abetted by Nasser and Nkrumah—might try to overthrow moderate pro-Western governments like their own."

If the French believed Malcolm was that mighty a wind of disruption, the CIA might well have also been convinced that Malcolm was becoming too formidable to be endured. And, as we learned much later, the CIA was accountable to no one but itself during this period.

I have been a journalist too long to be infatuated with conspiracy theories. I cite the CIA possibility here because of what Malcolm said to me and because of what the CIA's record during the 1960's says about the CIA. We shall probably never know if there was any CIA involvement in the murder of Malcolm; this is not the kind of information that comes pouring forth when you make a request under the Freedom of Information Act.

Despite what Malcolm said about not having long to live, his murder stopped me cold. Having taken my two young daughters home, I was walking along upper Broadway listening to a transistor radio. And there it was. I was in a daze for some time. All that intelligence, energy, passion, and leadership gone. In the years since, I have often thought of what might have been if Malcolm had been organizing and analyzing and teaching all these years. Maybe, among other things, he could have taught and organized leaders to come. Ain't many of them now.

There have been enough pieces about the aftermath of the murder and the slippery failure of police and press to follow through on who ordered the killing. I just want, however, to point out once more that there were a lot of undercover cops—with guns—in the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem on that Sunday afternoon. On February 23, the *New York Herald Tribune* quoted a "high police official" as saying that several members of the city's Red Squad, the Bureau of Special Services (BOSS) were in the room when Malcolm was killed. There also had to be FBI undercover men present, and maybe some from the CIA. Yet there was no rush by these agents of the state to go after the assassins, let alone to protect Malcolm once the first shot had been fired.

The easy explanation—accepted by the vast majority of the press and by those of its readers who still have an interest in the case—is that Malcolm was cut down by followers of Elijah Muhammad in punishment for Malcolm's having so publicly broken with the shepherd of the Nation of Islam. But just as Malcolm alive was not an easy man to figure out, so the agents behind the agents of his death remain difficult to identify.

The one element of his death that would have caused Malcolm acute embarrassment was the photograph, shown widely around the world, of his body-guard, on the ground, apparently trying to give Malcolm artificial respiration. Malcolm prided himself on being able to detect not only ordinary phonies, but also the most dangerous of the breed—undercover cops. He used to tell me how careful he was to screen everyone who worked closely with him.

EXCERPTED